PHILOSOPHES

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The thinkers who called themselves *philosophes* were a diverse group who lived in France in the eighteenth century and led an intellectual movement that came to be called the Enlightenment. They are usually credited for inventing the language and concepts that were used during the French Revolution, but they did not participate themselves in the Revolution, since all the most prominent members of the group had already died when the Revolution broke out in 1789. The group includes figures like Voltaire and Rousseau, who disagreed on many fundamental issues. What united them intellectually can best be seen in the *Encyclopedia*, published by Diderot and d'Alembert between 1751 and 1772. The *Encyclopedia* was an ambitious, 28-volume attempt to account for all aspects of human knowledge, both theoretical and applied. It was also a highly effective propaganda tool that sought to disseminate the ideas of the *philosophes*. Paradoxically, given the appropriation of the language of the *philosophes* by the leaders of the French Revolution, the *philosophes* (with the notable exception of Rousseau) did not put political theory at the center of their concerns. Tactical prudence is a partial explanation for this fact: any writing that offended the Church or the State could cause legal trouble. However, even if self-censorship is taken into account, it is clear from the writings of the *philosophes* that there was no thought of questioning the legitimacy of the French monarchy or imagining alternative systems of government. The focus of their intellectual and propaganda efforts was elsewhere. The *philosophes* sought to draw all the consequences (including political consequences) of the scientific revolution.

As d'Alembert puts it in the preface to the *Encyclopedia*, philosophy (what the *philosophes* do) is another name for science. The *philosophes* were enthusiastic backers of the New Science. The tree figuring the subdivisions of knowledge that appeared at the beginning of the *Encyclopedia* was adapted from the divisions proposed by Francis Bacon in the *Advancement of Learning* (1605). Like Bacon, the *philosophes* divided human learning according to three faculties: memory, reason and imagination. Philosophy was the domain of reason. In the *Encyclopedia*, philosophy was divided into natural and human; human philosophy was divided into logic and morals; morals was divided into general morals and particular morals, i.e. jurisprudence; jurisprudence was divided into natural, economic, and political jurisprudence. For the *philosophes*, what is now called political theory was jurisprudence, or the science of laws. Thus politics was derived from jurisprudence, and jurisprudence was derived from morals. It is worth comparing this system with the one proposed by Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes divided philosophy into natural philosophy and politics. Political theory was therefore one of two branches of human knowledge. For the *philosophes*, it was a branch much further down the tree.

The equation between political theory and jurisprudence was characteristic of the natural law tradition, illustrated in the seventeenth century by Grotius, Pufendorf, and Locke. The *philosophes* believed in the existence of a natural moral order, consistent with the dictates of reason, and knowable through the exercise of our rational faculties. Any rational being had an immediate sense of what was just and unjust. This sense was the first foundation of legislation, and it existed even in the absence of positive laws. For the

philosophes, it manifested itself most clearly in a negative way, through the sense of outrage one felt spontaneously before the illegitimate use of force and the oppression of the weak by the strong. Oppression was an insult to both nature and reason.

The *philosophes* followed Locke in arguing that political authority was based on a contract between the government and the governed. Diderot claimed that nature gave no one the right to rule and that freedom was a divine gift. Only parental authority, within limits, had a natural foundation. Political authority was based on the consent of the governed. The *philosophes* applied this notion to all forms of government, including France's monarchy. They argued that the king had the right to relinquish his crown, but could not transmit it to someone else without the consent of the nation, because it was the nation that had crowned the king. In legal terms, the crown was the nation's property and the king had usufructuary rights (i.e. the right to enjoy a property one does not own) on the crown. The king himself was a member of the nation and had the right to govern, but not the right to change the system of government. The transmission of the crown to the king's oldest son could not be subject to challenge, because it was a condition of the contract between the king and the nation. Only if the royal family was extinguished and no heirs could be identified through the rules of succession would the crown revert to the nation. The *Encyclopedia* has a long article on "freedom," which is divided into natural freedom, civil freedom, political freedom, and freedom of thought. Natural freedom is the right to do anything that does not hurt others. Civil freedom is the freedom that comes from obeying the laws, when the laws are enforced by an independent judiciary. Citizens have political freedom when a clear separation of powers makes them confident that they need not fear the actions of their fellow citizens. Freedom of thought is the ability to think rationally and without prejudice.

The belief the *philosophes* had in progress was based on their belief in the fundamental importance of the progress of science and technology. In his *Essay on Manners* (1756), Voltaire described the history of the world as the history of the progress of the human mind, from feeble beginnings to the tremendous accomplishments of the present. Voltaire did not focus on political and military history, but rather on the ways in which advances in scientific and technical knowledge had changed human behavior in all aspects of life. In that sense, the succession of political regimes and the adoption of this or that system of government were less important than the emergence of softer, more rational, and less violent ways everywhere. For Voltaire, progress in the arts and sciences went hand in hand with better government and a decrease in religious and political passions. Voltaire's advocacy of religious toleration flowed from the same principles: because religious minorities like the Protestants were no longer a threat to the State, they should be allowed the protection of natural law, i.e. family and inheritance rights (but no political rights). Voltaire wanted for Protestants in France the status that Catholics had in England. For Voltaire and the *philosophes* of his generation, belief in progress was therefore tempered by a sober assessment of political and social reality. It is only with the *philosophes* of the following generation like Condorcet, author of a *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) that the belief in progress took some utopian overtones.

The *philosophes* did not see their mission as limited to the advancement of knowledge. They tried to influence things in a concrete way by appealing to public opinion and swaying it in the direction they wanted. Voltaire spent considerable time and

energy for the rehabilitation of Calas, a Protestant who had been wrongly convicted of murder and executed. The Calas case was treated as a symbol of religious fanaticism getting in the way of true justice. Voltaire's focus was less the French judicial system than religious prejudice itself, which he felt was the root cause of the miscarriage of justice. The biggest propaganda effort was the *Encyclopedia* itself, which was aimed at increasing knowledge and decreasing prejudice. At the same time, public opinion for the *philosophes* did not mean the population at large, but rather the well-educated, i.e. a very small segment of the population. In the *Philosophical Letters* (1734), Voltaire insisted that the *philosophes* were neither a religious sect nor a political party, and he downplayed their influence, which he said was limited to intellectual pursuits and could not possibly threaten civil peace. A recurring feature of the writings of the *philosophes* is an attempt to educate and influence the rulers themselves, on the assumption that enlightened rulers will work for the public good. Voltaire put great stock in his friendship with Frederic the Great of Prussia before the two had a dramatic falling out. He praised the modernizing efforts of Peter the Great in Russia. Diderot was a protégé of Catherine II of Russia. The "Politics" article of the *Encyclopedia* ends with a complacent allusion to the *Anti-Machiavel*, a treatise written by Frederic with Voltaire's help, and it implies that Frederic is a philosopher-king.

Distrust of (or outright hostility to) organized religion, especially the Catholic Church, was a shared trait of the *philosophes*, who viewed religious fanaticism as the biggest threat to civil peace everywhere. At the same time, the *philosophes* saw organized religion as the most effective tool for enforcing moral standards in the population at large. Most of the *philosophes* were deists, and observed the rituals of organized religion as a matter of social conformity while believing in an architect of the universe, whose existence could be ascertained through rational means. A few (Diderot, Helvetius) were atheists.

The two greatest political theorists associated with the *philosophes*, Montesquieu and Rousseau, were in a sense peripheral to the group. Montesquieu wrote one article (on "taste") for the *Encyclopedia*, but he died in 1755, long before the completion of the series. His *Spirit of the Laws* (1748) received a cool reception from Voltaire and the other *philosophes*. Rousseau's contribution to the *Encyclopedia* included one important article on political economy, which foreshadowed the theories of the *Social Contract*. All his other articles were on music. After the publication of the *Second Discourse* (1755), which was derided by Voltaire as naïve primitivism, Rousseau kept his distance from the group, and he became estranged from Diderot, who had been a close friend.

There were *philosophes* on both sides of one of the most important debates of the eighteenth century: the debate on luxury. Voltaire subscribed to the paradox enunciated by Mandeville in the *Fable of the Bees* (1714): private vices, public benefits. He saw the development of commerce and the general increase in wealth as a potent civilizing force that curbed violent behavior and favored wiser, more moderate government. The starting point for Rousseau's political theory was the rejection of the idea that greed could be the foundation of a stable political order. Writing on political economy for the *Encyclopedia*, Rousseau argued that the most important task of government was to educate the people in the love and respect of the laws, because the greatest support for public authority lied in the hearts of the citizens. This emphasis on republican virtue was originally a minority view among the *philosophes*, but it became widespread in the second half of the

eighteenth century. Both Montesquieu and Voltaire had praised the English system of mixed government, and argued that political freedom was the happy result of the conflict between the King and Parliament. Later in the century, there was much greater skepticism regarding the stability or desirability of systems based on countervailing powers.

Belief in a natural moral order was not shared by everyone in the group. Neo-Epicureans like Helvetius (whom Diderot criticized) thought of justice and morality as artificial constructs, and posited self-interest as the first principle of human behavior. On the other hand, Helvetius followed Locke's theory of consent, and he shared Rousseau's love of republican virtue. The axioms of Bentham's utilitarianism can be found in large part in the political theory of Helvetius.

The *philosophes* were active members of the Republic of Letters, a European network of scientists and writers, and their ideas were disseminated throughout Europe. David Hume and Adam Smith were major interlocutors of the *philosophes*. The young Adam Smith professed his admiration for Voltaire and he wrote an enthusiastic review of the first volumes of the *Encyclopedia*. In Italy, Beccaria applied the principles of the *philosophes* to a reflection on penal systems. In Germany, Lessing wrote about the history of humanity as progress toward the rule of pure reason. The leaders of the American Revolution were well versed in the writings of the *philosophes*, especially Montesquieu but also Voltaire and Rousseau.

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Suggestions for further reading:

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